

Speaking in Circle: Lived Experiences of White-Seeming Privilege

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Introduction

This article summarizes my master's thesis work around the intersection between white privilege and Indigenous identity in fair-skinned Indigenous folk (Downey, 2017), or what Thomas King (2008) has called “the racial shadow zones that have been created for us and that we create for ourselves” (p. 14). The thesis project was an autobiographical examination of my own Indigenous identity and white privilege. This paper will discuss white-seeming privilege, a term I use to describe the aforementioned intersection. It will also summarize the project's methodology and historical and personal contexts toward a deeper understanding of white-seeming privilege.

White-Seeming Privilege

Many Indigenous authors have commented on the phenomenon of looking white while being Indigenous. One particularly salient example is Drew Hayden Taylor's *Pretty Like a White Boy* (1992), in which Taylor describes his own experience of being fair-skinned and Indigenous:

I have both white and red blood in me, I guess that makes me pink... My pinkness is constantly being pointed out to me over and over and over again. ‘You don't look Indian?’ ‘You're not Indian, are you?’ ‘Really?!?’ I got questions like that from both white and native people, for a while I debated having my status card tattooed on my forehead (p. 327).

What Taylor refers to as his pinkness, I have examined under the

term white-seeming privilege. Broadly speaking, white-seeming privilege is when a person who identifies as something other than white is mistakenly seen as white and gains access to privilege through that mistaken identification (Downey, 2017). Another implication of the term is that as one is seen as white, one's self-identified cultural labels are erased. In the case of Indigenous people, this erasure is only one manifestation of the settler-colonial assimilation endemic to our society (Brayboy, 2005; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015).

At this point, I should note that some readers might be more familiar with the term white-passing privilege as it has been used more widely in social media (Ellingburg, 2015; Watanabe, 2015) and momentarily in academic writing (Jeffries, 2015). I have, however, avoided using the term "passing" for two reasons. First, in some Mi'kmaw communities the term passing is used specifically to refer to one's journey from the physical world back to the spirit world—that is, the end of their physical journey. As such, using white-seeming is one of the ways in which I honour what Margaret Kovach (2009) has called my tribal epistemology. Second, in the academic literature, the term passing refers to "when people effectively present themselves as other than who they understand themselves to be" (Kroeger, 2003, p. 7). Embedded in this definition is an element of intentional deception (Khanna & Johnson, 2010). This intentional deception is not consistent with my experience of being a fair-skinned Indigenous person. Although I am frequently seen as a white settler, I make no attempt to present myself that way. As such, *white-seeming* is both a more appropriate and accurate term for the specific phenomenon I have described throughout my work.

Methodology and Epistemology

The autobiographical nature of this project created a situation best addressed by a combination of Indigenous (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008) and arts-informed (Cole & Knowles, 2001, 2008) methodologies. It was important to me as a Mi'kmaq person that my work honour the philosophical tenants of Indigenous epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodology. At the time, however, I found it difficult to find examples of research with such a positioning that were entirely autobiographical. The project thus required a unique methodological underpinning that would allow me to focus solely on my own story while also enabling the Indigenous theory principles to resonate unencumbered. This led to the synthesis of my own Indigenous worldview with arts-informed research. A term resisting simplistic definition, arts-informed research is characterised as:

A mode and form of qualitative research in the social sciences that is influenced by, but not based in, the arts broadly conceived. The central purposes of arts-informed research are to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible. The methodology infuses the languages, processes, and forms of literary, visual, and performing arts with the expansive possibilities of scholarly inquiry for the purposes of advancing knowledge. (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59)

In my project, the openness of arts-informed methodology to a variety of modes, forms, and languages gave me access to the diversity of voice I needed to tell my story and to represent it in an authentic and appropriate way. More specifically, using arts-informed methodology allowed me to integrate poetry and personal storytelling into my academic writing. Arts-informed

methodology also provided the idea for a binding artistic form: “Form is the main defining element of arts-informed research” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 62). In arts-informed research, form is integrated into every step of the research process creating a sort of methodically integrity and internal consistency in the work that defines its rigour (Cole & Knowles, 2008). In my research, this commitment to an artistic form was what allowed my project to cover such divergent ground while still maintaining a focused discussion. I framed my entire thesis as a discussion between two aspects of my identity, my white self and my Indigenous self, within a traditional talking circle where both were seeking reconciliation—a reconciliation of self. This metaphorical talking circle allowed me to pull together the various threads of my own story and my family history and contextualize them within the academic literature around Indigenous knowledge, white privilege and whiteness, (tribal) critical race theory, and racial passing. The complicated nature of the discussion was ultimately made clear by the binding artistic metaphor and form.

It is worth noting here that this holistic approach to the generation of knowledge is consistent with Indigenous philosophy: “Because philosophy, literature, science, and religion are one in American Indian thought, we cannot truly separate the medicine from the magic nor the philosophy from the poem” (Burkhart, 2004, p. 23). In my project, poetry, personal storytelling, analysis, and conversation were inseparable—such is the nature of Indigenous thought.

Historical and Personal Context

The driving forces behind my thesis were my own experience with white-seeming privilege and the systematic colonization and erasure of my Indigenous ancestors that facilitates my access to that privilege. Indeed, because discussions of privilege

run the risk of becoming essentialist (Razack, 1998), any understanding of white-seeming privilege ought to be contextualized in individual and familial history. There is not one white-seeming privilege, but rather an infinite, ever-moving plurality of white-seeming privileges to be shared (Downey, 2017). I briefly present my own here.

When I was growing up, I did not understand myself as an Indigenous person. If you asked me about my identity in grade 10, I would have told you that I was a punk, a musician, or a Newfoundlander. The only way you may have discovered my Indigeneity was if you asked about my ancestry. I just wanted to be seen as “normal” and, thus, pushed aside my Indigenous heritage in favour of counter-cultural and geographic labels. As I grew older, my Indigeneity became more important to me, but in the process of rediscovering and reclaiming my Indigenous self, I encountered countless instances of resistance by both Indigenous people and settlers. These experiences were similar to those described by Taylor (1992) and left me with a curiosity about my position in society as a fair-skinned Indigenous person.

That curiosity led me to question why at 15 I thought of myself as a Newfoundlander and as a musician before Mi'kmaw. To answer this question, I looked into my own family history and the colonization and erasure of Indigenous identity on the West Coast of Newfoundland, my ancestral territory. In summary, there is a colonial notion that the Mi'kmaq are not Indigenous to Newfoundland (Wetzel, 1995), but thorough reviews of the available literature have suggested that Mi'kmaq have used the west and south coasts of Newfoundland since well before contact in a manner consistent with my ancestors' migratory subsistence cycles (Wetzel, 1995). A major migration of Mi'kmaq to the West Coast of Newfoundland occurred in the 18th century (Bartles & Janzen, 1991). The Mi'kmaq living in Nova Scotia had begun to feel

pressure from the encroaching English government, and many opted for what Upton (1979) has referred to as “passive resistance,” which took the form of moving to Newfoundland and away from colonial oppression. The West Coast of Newfoundland was not a pressing concern for the colonial governments of the time. As such the French, Mi’kmaw, and eventually English inhabitants were largely left to their own devices (Jackson, 1993). My ancestors likely arrived at the Bay of St. George’s from Eskasoni sometime in the late 18th century (Bartles & Janzen, 1991; Jackson, 1993). Upon arriving, my ancestors quickly began a quiet but forced assimilation through intermarriage and the changing of surnames (Jackson, 1993). In subsequent generations, a nationalistic Newfoundland identity, the presence of the Catholic church, and negative myths about the Mi’kmaq all contributed to the erasure of Indigenous identity on the West Coast of Newfoundland and, specifically, in my own family (Downey, 2017; see also Wetzel, 1995).

In my lifetime, there was a certain awareness of my family’s Indigenous heritage but an accompanying reluctance to discuss the matter. My grandfather, in particular, was often silenced by those around him when he attempted to tell stories or speak about our traditions; there was no pride in being a *jack-y-tar*, the derogatory term given to refer to people of mixed French and Mi’kmaw ancestry in Newfoundland. It wasn’t until the early 2000s that my family started to speak openly about our Indigenous heritage, and it took another 10 years to accept my Indigeneity internally. Thus, in my life, the cost of white-seeming privilege has been 20 years of erased identity, not to mention the immeasurable cultural loss of past generations. When I am seen as white, I do gain access to privilege, but the erasure of my Indigenous identity and my tacit assimilation are allowed to continue. There is no dichotomy to this privilege; privilege and penalty exist simultaneously in the same

aspect of my identity. I both am and am not privileged by my complicated history.

Results, Discussion, and Conclusion

The results of my inquiries are best taken as a whole. As with many arts-informed projects, the major result is simply the existence of the project. My inquiry exists as art in its holistic nature; therein lays the project's rigour, complexity, and beauty. The central theoretical thread of the project, however, is the emerging understanding of my privilege as interlocking and intersectional, but non-dichotomous.

To me, there is a need to look at race, privilege, and Indigenous identity in less dichotomous terms. In recent years, people like Joseph Boyden and Rachel Dolezal have been subjected to public scrutiny regarding their identities. Joseph Boyden came under attack for speaking on behalf of Indigenous people when, in the eyes of some, his Indigenous identity lacked authenticity (Barrera, 2016). Rachel Dolezal, a self-identified black woman with two white parents, received criticism for identifying as other than she was born (Dolezal & Reback, 2017). Though overly dichotomous conceptions of race and privilege make it difficult to simultaneously acknowledge privilege and claim a subordinated identity, in my mind both these public figures made one crucial mistake: they failed to acknowledge their own white (seeming) privilege. Despite the fact that we people of translucent identity, occupants of the racial shadow zones, are of another (often subordinate) culture, race, or ethnicity, we still have white skin, and that brings us undeniable privilege in Western society. To anchor ourselves solely in our subordination is to be deceitful in our relationships with others and ourselves. The path to reconciliation is through truthfulness. Truthfulness starts by sharing the full story of our privilege and our penalty and creating grey space for others

to do the same without being publically shamed. Black and white thinking only serves to alienate those resting in the shades between.

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